

INVESTIGATION OF A HORSE ATTACK IN WESTERN JACKSON COUNTY, MICHIGAN

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On September 2, 2005 I inspected a 26-year old Arabian horse found dead by its owner on the morning of August 31. The location was a residence and horse ranch in western Jackson County; the precise location is on file but is being withheld from this report at the horse owner's request. The horse owner stated his neighbors reported they heard his horses whinnying at about 1:30 a.m. His dog, kept indoors, also began barking at that time. He found the dead horse on flat ground within dense shrub cover at the edge of his pasture. The horse owner saw a long trail of blood on the dead animal's neck and soon after called 911, which contacted the Jackson County Sheriff's Department and Parma Township police, reporting that he suspected his horse's throat had been slashed.

Jackson County Animal Control Officers Machelie Dunlap and Mark Abbott received the call at 8:31 a.m. and arrived at the scene at approximately 10:00 a.m. (August 31). After determining that the horse's wounds were not knife cuts or bullet wounds, they performed a more detailed investigation in the presence of the horse owner and Parma Township Supervisor Wendy Chamberlain, who had been contacted by the Parma Township police.

The ACOs took color photographs of puncture marks and various measurements. These are noted later in this report. They thoroughly inspected the animal, and skinned back a section of the neck to determine the depths of the more obvious punctures. They also searched the ground where the dead horse was found. They finished their inspection around 3:00 p.m., and the animal was buried that evening in uplands about 250 feet from where it was found.

I visited the scene at 9:00 a.m. on September 2. I was met by ACO Dunlap, Ms. Chamberlain, the horse owner, and a backhoe operator. After reviewing the photographs and measurements taken on August 31 by the ACOs, I (with the help of the backhoe operator) uncovered the horse carcass, which was under about 5 feet of dirt. The carcass was not badly decayed; undried blood was still evident and the neck and head could be easily moved to allow careful inspection. I identified each puncture mark noted and/or photographed by the ACOs. In addition, I found two punctures the ACOs had not seen in the tongue, and two more in the lower neck/throat area. I took photographs during my inspection as did ACO Dunlap.

A total of 8 sets of puncture wounds were noted. The puncture wounds corresponding to the upper canines of the predator were approximately 49 mm (2 inches) apart; the marks

of the lower canines were 39 mm (1 ½ inches) apart. Two were found at the upper (back) of the neck just behind the base of the skull. Considerable hemorrhaging was evident there. The puncture holes extended downward 50-60 mm to the depth of the neck vertebrae and spinal cord. The horse was also bitten at the base of the left ear, penetrating part of the skull. There were three claw marks within 100 mm of the wound. Two prominent puncture wounds were also found on the left side of the horse's neck. Two puncture marks (39 mm apart) were found lower on the throat; they appeared to penetrate less than 30 mm. I assumed these to be from the lower canines.

Two puncture marks were also found in the horse's tongue. One was almost exactly near the mid-line and although very evident, only penetrated about 15 mm (1/2 inch). The other was on the edge of the tongue. No other puncture or scratch marks associated with the predator's attack were found anywhere on the horse. No significant part of the carcass was consumed. However, ACO Dunlap and Ms. Chamberlain noted that on August 31 some of the blood on the horse was matted and appeared to them to have been licked.

Following my inspection of the carcass, I examined the spot where the horse was found dead. There was no evidence the horse had been dragged to the spot; rather it appeared to have been killed within an area less than 20 feet in diameter. About 6 square feet of ground was covered with dried blood several mm thick. Three track prints consistent with cougar were found within 15 feet of the blood. Each measured about 3.75 inches in length and width. They were found where the hard-packed ground had been disturbed by horses. ACO Dunlap, Ms. Chamberlain and the horse owner stated emphatically that the cougar tracks were too visible to not have been seen on August 31. Therefore, it seemed that the cougar had returned to the kill scene sometime between the afternoon of August 31 and the morning of September 2.

I then visited the scene of a reported cougar sighting by Ms. Chamberlain. She was traveling north on a road about 1 ¼ miles from the kill site at 10:30 a.m. on September 1, and reported seeing a cougar she estimated was about 6 feet long slowly cross the road less than 35 feet from her car. She had returned to the sighting area later that morning with ACO Dunlap, a State Police officer, and another woman. They reported finding three prints where the animal had walked into a cornfield. I was led to the tracks, but could see only one consistent with cougar in size and shape. Details of the print were not evident. The other two prints had been accidentally stepped on before I arrived at the scene, so I could not examine them.

Based on my observations and measurements, I conclude that the horse was indeed killed by a cougar. No other explanation is plausible. The locations size and pattern of the bite marks were consistent with that of a large adult cougar in every detail. The only other Michigan predator capable of killing a large, healthy, adult horse is a big black bear. The bite pattern and lack of claw marks on the sides and back were inconsistent with bear, a species seldom seen in Jackson County in the last 100 years. Additional evidence -- the tracks found and reported sightings by Ms. Chamberlain and others -- points to a cougar attack.